

Setting the letters on her brother's desk, Lilith looked up to find Sebastian studying her. He expected her to say something, she suspected, but what was there to say? She gleaned nothing new from their father's correspondences, letters she had read many times since reuniting with her brother. There was no point in reading them again.

The letters may paint a picture of her past, but it was not the past that coincided with her memories. She cherished her few memories, clung to them as a lifeline, yet each reading of the letters frayed those memories little bit by little bit.

The bleakest days at the orphanage, the most hopeless of nights, all were manageable with the memories of her mother, even the few memories tainted by the presence of her father. These letters told a different tale. They told the tale of a stranger being her birth mother rather than the loving woman from her memories. A birth mother who did not want her, who abandoned her, just as her father did years later.

She glanced back to the letters on the edge of the desk, avoiding her brother's eyes.

One letter expressed love, hinted at an elopement, and implied being in the family way, a letter written by Lily Chambers, nothing more than a servant's daughter at the Roddam estate. That letter had been written to the earl's son and heir, Tobias Lancaster. Another letter, also written by Lily, a year after the first, briefly introduced Tobias to his daughter, a baby she had abandoned on the doorstep of the home he now shared with his new wife, Jane. The last of the three letters, written by Mrs. Brighton of the orphanage to Tobias seven years after the second, confirmed the removal of Lilith from the Roddam estate to be brought to the orphanage forthwith.

Her whole sordid existence lay on her brother's desk.

"It's a wonder you didn't end up in a workhouse," Sebastian said, reaching for the letters.

Lilith looked out of the window, losing herself for a moment in the view of waves licking black rocks on the beach below.

As much as she had always loved the water, it was a wonder she found any solace in Allshire with it being a landlocked parish nearly a hundred miles from the coast. How could she ever call a place so far from the sea her home? But then, how could she ever call any place home? She did not belong anywhere. Not really.

“Surely,” she said, turning to face Sebastian, “he felt some affection for this Lily Chambers, for my— my mother. It could have been guilt, but I believe he was more compassionate than we give him credit. Of all the orphanages, he chose one that educated the orphans rather than prepared them for the workhouse. How else can we explain his securing my position at that particular orphanage if he didn’t care? And why donate enough money not only for my livelihood but for renovations of the facilities? To be accepted at the orphanage, orphans must be financially sponsored, but nothing more is required or expected aside from their livelihood for the extent of their stay. Yet, he paid so much more than that.”

Sebastian tapped his fingers against the desk, scowling. “Our father didn’t have a compassionate bone in his body. No man with compassion lies to his son by telling the boy his sibling is dead. No man with compassion blames his son for the death of that sibling and then beats a mere child within an inch of his life as punishment for that death. No, that man was not compassionate. He was pure evil.”

“I’m sorry you suffered, ‘Bastian,” she said, her heart aching for all he endured.

“You have nothing for which to feel sorry. He abused us both, even if the abuse took different forms.” Sebastian stood and walked to the window, leaning himself against the stone wall. “I don’t know his motive for sending you away when you had been raised as his and our mother’s daughter. He could very well have continued to raise you as his legitimate daughter after Mother died since no one knew the truth. I don’t know his motive, and I don’t care to know. Frankly, I don’t see the point in trying to rationalize his behavior. Forget about the woman who birthed you and forget about our father. We both shared a mother who loved us until her death. Shall we be content to be together again and stop digging up the past?”

The tension in the room chilled Lilith. She knew from Lizbeth how much Sebastian had suffered at the hand of their father, but was it so wrong for Lilith to want to learn more about her past? She only wanted to make sense of who she was.

“Can you so easily let go of the past?” Lilith queried tentatively.

“Not easily, no,” Sebastian admitted. “Lizbeth has been instrumental in helping me let go. You cannot imagine how the past tortured me, Lil. I felt responsible for your death. I accepted our father’s abuse as my own deserved punishment.”

He beat his shoulder against the stone wall and growled. “Devil take it, Lil. I spent my life thinking you drowned because I left you to play alone, never realizing you were safely tucked away in an orphanage.”

He turned back to her, crossing his arms over his chest, his eyes black and inscrutable. “I spent a lifetime clinging to the past. I’m only now learning to let go. I suggest you do the same.”

“Very well, then. Burn the letters,” Lilith challenged, not at all sure she wanted him to act on the gauntlet she had thrown down.

“Pardon?” He stared at her with incredulously wide eyes.

“Burn them. Right now. Toss them into the fire. Keeping them does neither of us any good.” Picking up the letters, she thrust them in his direction, her lips pursed and her hand steady.

Sebastian said nothing. Instead, he reached across her for the tea tray and filled their cups before taking his seat. His eyes flicked to the letters in her outstretched hand but otherwise paid no heed to her request.

“My steward at Roddam Hall has been shipping one crate at a time from Father’s office. Lizbeth and I have been cleaning out his files and possessions. Most of what we find is discarded. A few items have been kept and may be put to some use. He had, for example, a collection of travel journals that we’re planning to publish. I tell you this, Lilith, because this is how at peace I am with the past. I can look through his possessions and not feel raw fury. At least, not anymore. I now see everything of his as objects, not as representations of the man.”

He looked at the letters again then back to Lilith. “These letters are not items to be hated. They led us to you, after all. There is no need to mull over them every time you visit nor is there a need to destroy them. They are only letters.”

“Only letters,” she repeated with a scoff.

“I don’t need to understand the past. I refuse to be hurt by inanimate objects, letters included. I only want to move forward.” Softly, almost under his breath, he added, “As should you.”

He was right. There was nothing more to be learned about her past, and there was no way to second-guess a dead man’s motives for cruelty or kindness. Even if she could learn more, what would it prove?

Knowing the uselessness of such inquiry did not stop Lilith from wondering if their father had loved her birth mother or if he resented a youthful mistake that resulted in a consequence. She could not stop from wondering why her mother had chosen to leave her on her father's doorstep. She could not stop wondering why her father's new wife had taken her in and raised her as her own.

The letters told a cold story, one of facts without emotion or motive. They were inanimate objects, as Sebastian said, incapable of causing pain.

The feel of the paper burned her fingertips all the same.

Her arm still stretched, she flicked the letters towards him, willing him to take them away, at least, to hide them in a drawer where she could not find them. They were nothing more than reminders of abandonment by people who should have loved her and reminders that the memories of her mother were not of her *real* mother.

"Devil take it, Lil." He growled.

In one swift motion, Sebastian snatched the papers out of her hand and launched himself across the room to the hearth, tossing the letters into hungry flames.

She heard a gasp when the fire devoured the pages, startled to realize it had been she who gasped. Her body perspired as if she, too, were being devoured by fire. Her hands gripped the arms of the chair to restrain herself from rushing to the fire and saving the remnants of her birth mother.

After the ashes settled, Sebastian turned to her.

"Drink your tea. You're as pale as death," he rumbled.

Her fingers, stiff, unfurled one by one from the wood. She flexed against the ache from clenching too tightly.

Nothing would bring back the letters. It was done.